

This is an electronic version of the following article published by Taylor and Francis:
Pike, A, O'Brien, P. and Tomaney, J. Trade unions in local and regional development
and governance: the Northern Trades Union Congress in North East England. *Local
Economy* 2004, 19(2), 1-15.

Available online at:

<http://www.informaworld.com/openurl?genre=article&issn=0269-0942&volume=19&issue=2&spage=102>

Trade unions in local and regional development and governance: the Northern Trades Union Congress in North East England

Revised Paper for Local Economy

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ABSTRACT

From a position of relative isolation, trade unions have become increasingly important agents in local and regional development and governance in the UK since the election of the New Labour government in 1997. Analysis of the experience of the Northern Trades Union Congress (NTUC) suggests that devolution and regionalisation are exerting increasing pressures upon trade union federations to adopt a multi-level approach to organisation across a

range of scales – local, sub-regional, regional, sub-national, national and international – to connect with the evolving multi-layered governance structures of the UK political economy. Strategic multi-level organisation suggests the decentralisation of power, authority and resources within the labour movement – challenging the national and centralised legacy of its collective bargaining history – and a division of labour and set of priorities at the different scales to build the links between local and regional engagement and trade union renewal.

INTRODUCTION

From a position of relative isolation, trade unions have become increasingly important agents in local and regional development and governance in the UK since the election of the New Labour government in 1997. At the national level, trade unions are seen to be ‘coming in from the cold’ (CLES 1999) through their growing involvement in the new institutions of governance (e.g. Low Pay Commission, New Deal Task Force) and a renewal of their role in shaping legislation within existing governance arrangements (e.g. employment rights, information and consultation, health and safety). At the sub-national, regional and local levels too, a similar thaw is evident as the devolution and regionalisation of political and administrative structures have opened the doors to trade union participation in local and regional development and governance (Bache and George 1999; UNISON 2000; Heselden 2001; Pike, O'Brien and Tomaney 2002; TUC 2002). The local and regional dimensions of trade unionism have begun to gain a degree of national recognition:

With devolution comes the opportunity for the trade union movement to reaffirm our role as influential and positive partners in the economic and social regeneration of all the regions and nations of the UK

(Former General Secretary of the TUC, John Monks cited in (O'Brien 2001): 1).

To a degree, such developments could be interpreted as the adoption of aspects of the European model of decentralised, regionalised governance and plural, inclusive social partnership (Streeck 1992). Alongside other economic and social partners in the private and voluntary sectors, trade unions now face the substantive opportunities and challenges of engaging – perhaps to a much greater degree than hitherto – with local and regional development and governance.

Underlying these shifts in the position of trade unions are several theoretical and empirical undercurrents. First, institutionalist approaches have emphasised the socio-institutional infrastructure and context – of which trade unions are an integral part – in which processes of regional development and governance are embedded (Martin 1999). Second, debates about ‘New Regionalism’ have discussed the significance or otherwise of the (re)emergence of the region as an economic, social and political unit for individual and collective social agency (Amin 1999; Lovering 1999). Third, an overlapping concern has developed in industrial relations and labour geography with the significance of local and regional contexts in systems of trade unionism and industrial relations beneath the national level (Herod, Peck and Wills 2002). In particular, attention has focused on the ways in which trade union renewal may be advanced by ‘looking beyond the factory gates’ to build progressive alliances for economic and social justice with local and regional community interests (Wills 2001). Trade unions may need to develop

into more inclusive social movements rather than narrowly Labourist guardians of workplace and member interests to “...achieve the political cachet and social respect - as carriers of the ‘general interest’ - needed to secure supports for their own organisation” (Rogers Hollingsworth 1995): 368). In sum, recent work emphasises the importance of the local and regional dimensions of trade unionism and the potentially positive relations between local and regional engagement and trade union renewal.

Despite these profound and recent changes, relatively little is known about the emergent and renewed trade union influence in economic, social and political affairs at the local and regional levels. This article seeks to address this gap. The focus is on the Trades Union Congress (TUC) — the main institutional federation of affiliated trade unions in England and Wales. Little research has focused on the TUC except at the national level (Taylor 2000). The argument is that devolution and regionalisation are exerting increasing pressures upon trade union federations to adopt a multi-level approach to organisation across a range of scales – local, sub-regional, regional, sub-national, national and international – in order to connect with the evolving multi-layered governance structures of the UK political economy. Strategic relationships are being recast vertically – between levels – and horizontally – across levels – in their internal and external governance arrangements. Strategic multi-level organisation suggests the decentralisation of power, authority and resources within the labour movement – challenging the national and centralised legacy of its collective bargaining history – and a division of labour and set of priorities at

the different scales to build the links between local and regional engagement and trade union renewal.

This paper is based upon joint research between CURDS and the Northern TUC (NTUC) that examined the engagement of trade union federations in local and regional development and governance in the North East and North West English regions and Wales (O'Brien, Pike and Tomaney Forthcoming). The project involved over 80 interviews with trade union officers, activists, politicians, public officials and private sector representatives, secondary source analysis and non-participant observation in meetings, seminars and conferences between 1999 and 2002. Here, the focus is North East England due to its entrenched economic and social problems, high trade union density, Labourist political traditions and leading role in debates concerning devolution and regionalisation in the English regions.

TRADE UNIONS AND THE REGIONAL PROBLEM IN NORTH EAST ENGLAND

North East England remains a longstanding 'heartland' of trade unionism in the UK (Martin, Sunley and Wills 1996). Despite the long run de-industrialisation of the region's traditional unionised industries and the often non-union character of more recent industrialisation, the North East remains relatively highly unionised and lies third to Northern Ireland and Wales nationally (Table 1). The prolonged depth and intractability of regional industrial decline and accommodative history has bred a degree of

pragmatism amongst the regional labour movement (Austrin and Beynon 1997). Trade unions have often been largely willing partners in strategies and institutions of regional economic renewal. As the regional trade union federation, the NTUC were involved alongside business and the local state in pioneering the establishment of the Northern Development Company in the mid-1980s, partially echoing the establishment of the development agencies in Scotland and Wales a decade earlier. The NTUC's role typified the tripartite, corporatist arrangements characteristic of the residual role of trade union federations in historically strong Labourist regions such as the North East (Shaw 1993) and Wales (Morgan and Rees 2001), even at the height of Conservative antipathy.

Table 1: Trade Union Membership (%)*, Autumn 2002

Region/Nation	All employees
United Kingdom	29
North East	38
North West	34
Yorkshire and the Humber	32
East Midlands	28
West Midlands	30
East	23
London	25
South East	21
South West	26
England	28
Wales	40
Scotland	34
Northern Ireland	41

* As a percentage of all employees in each region, excluding the armed forces and those who did not say whether they belonged to a trade union.

Source: Labour Force Survey

Despite numerous state-sponsored and market-led attempts at structural change dating back to the 1930s, North East England has remained lodged at the sharp end of the UK's deep and entrenched regional disparities (Robinson 2002) (Table 2). Unemployment remains stubbornly high and above the national average with significant concentrations and even higher levels 'hidden unemployment' (Fothergill 2001). In terms of wealth and prosperity, the North East has the lowest gross value added per capita, almost 25% lower than the UK level. At just over 10% lower than the national level, gross disposable household income is level with Northern Ireland and only just higher than Wales. However, historical attempts to link high levels of trade union membership and poor regional economic performance (Minford 1985) tend to confuse correlation with causation, provide crude analyses based upon a narrow reading of neo-classical economics and carry the suspicion of New Right political bias. Broadly based international evidence — including The World Bank (Aidt and Tzannatos 2002) — suggests that trade unions can promote rather than inhibit regional and national economic prosperity and the social and territorial equity of growth through contributions to learning and skills development, employee involvement, productivity and the equalities agenda (Dunlop 1994; CEC 1996; Etherington 1997).

Table 2: Unemployment, Gross Value Added (GVA) and Household Income by Region and Nation

Regions/Nations	Unemployment*	Gross Value Added***		Household Income****	
	Rate**	Per Capita (£)	Index (UK = 100)	Per Capita (£)	Index (UK = 100)
North East	6.4	11,019	76.1	9,018	89
North West	5.0	13,011	89.9	9,501	94
Yorkshire and the Humber	5.4	12,468	86.2	9,325	92
East Midlands	4.2	13,268	91.7	9,409	93
West Midlands	5.7	13,070	90.3	9,541	94
East	4.1	13,926	96.2	10,638	105
London	7.0	22,607	156.2	12,207	120
South East	3.8	15,908	109.9	11,055	109
South West	3.8	12,880	89.0	10,073	99
Wales	4.4	11,396	78.8	8,870	87
Scotland	5.6	13,660	94.4	9,870	97
Northern Ireland	5.3	11,311	78.2	8,998	89
United Kingdom	5.0	14,470	100	10,142	100.00

* ILO Unemployment for Spring 2003; ** Denominator = Totally Economically Active; *** Provisional Headline Gross Value Added (GVA) (Workplace Basis) per head for 2001. **** Gross Disposable Household Income (GDHI) for 1999. UK excludes GDHI for Extra-Regio.

Source: Labour Force Survey, Office for National Statistics

Due to its entrenched economic problems, the North East has long been a 'state-managed' region and subject to the volatile history of UK regional policy (Hudson 1998). The changing national policy and institutional context of New Labour's 'new regional economic policy', the establishment of RDAs and 'new localism' in area-based regeneration partnerships (Balls 2000) have created new opportunities for trade union participation in local and regional development and governance. The NTUC's experience in North East England provides some evidence of the extent and nature of such engagement.

THE NORTHERN TUC IN NORTH EAST ENGLAND

Reflecting its position within the British traditions of centralised governance, any influence wielded by the Trades Union Congress (TUC) has historically been achieved at the national level (Taylor 2000). The TUC's regional and sub-national organisation has developed only slowly since the early 1970s. Changes involved the alignment of the TUC's Trade Union Councils with reorganised local government structures and the establishment of voluntary or part-time TUC Regional Secretaries with little or no administrative support. In the context of the 1970s devolution debates, the national TUC recognised the Welsh trade union campaign to establish a distinctive collective trade union body in Wales in 1974. With its historical grounding in the local activism of Trades Councils and Scottish affairs, the Scottish TUC was already an independent organisation following the 1897 split (Aitken 1997). Further regionalisation in England was constrained by the persistence of the TUC's

national centralised structures, the unwillingness of traditionally powerful affiliate unions to provide finance and the fear that decentralisation may diminish national trade union power and influence.

In England, the involvement of TUC Regional Secretaries in the corporatist Regional Economic Planning Councils (REPCs) with local government, the CBI and other regional bodies brought some success for the emergent regional tier. However, the growing workload and lack of administrative and research capacity hampered the effectiveness and development of union engagement. Relative isolation in the wilderness years from the late 1970s, following the dismantling of the REPCs, reduced involvement to the nomination of (often senior) individuals from both trade unions and the NTUC to the boards of public bodies and assorted 'quangos', particularly during the 1980s (e.g. Regional Development Organisations, TECs, UDCs, universities and colleges). In the hostile political atmosphere of Thatcherism, the New Right blamed trade unions for the 'British Disease' of national economic under-performance and regarded them as vestiges of the failed 1970s corporatism. Compounded by its weakness in developing a distinctive contribution to local and regional development and governance debates, the NTUC remained on the fringes of local and regional decision-making during the 1980s and much of the 1990s, taking its lead from other institutions.

New Labour's election in 1997 radically changed the policy agenda and institutional architecture of local and regional development and governance. Devolution and regionalisation meant the adaptation of existing organisations,

including the regional Government Offices (GOs), and the establishment of the RDAs as the new lead institution in the English regions. While a modest institutional innovation with somewhat limited powers and resources relative to their responsibilities, the Act gave trade unions a statutory seat on RDA boards alongside other regional interests (Table 3). NTUC work jointly with the NW TUC and RDA because Cumbria remains part of the NTUC's regional structures but is within the NW GO region (Figure 1). Indeed, the lack of alignment with GO regions stretches the TUC's resources – 6 regional TUCs cover 9 GO regions (including London). In addition, the North East RDA has utilised Sub-Regional Partnerships (Northumberland, Tyne and Wear, Durham, Tees Valley) and each has trade union involvement.

Table 3: RDA Board Membership by Region and Sector, 1999*

Region	Local Authorities	Private	HE and FE	NDPBs	Voluntary and 'Not-for-Profit'	Trade Unions	Rural
Eastern	4	4	0	2	1	1	1.5
East Midlands	3.5	5	1	0	0.5	1	1.5
North East	3.5	3	1	2	1	1	1.5
North West	3.5	5	1	0.5	1.5	1	0.5
South East	3.5	3	1	0	1	1	1.5
South West	4	3	1	2	0	1	1.5
West Midlands	4	3	2	0.5	0.5	1	1.5
Yorkshire and the Humber	4	3 (+1)	1	0	2	1	0.5

* Units of 0.5 represent representation for more than one constituency.

Source: DETR Press Release 1079/98

Figure 1: TUC Regions*



* In the early 1990s, the TUC's South East and East Anglian Regional Councils merged to create the Southern and Eastern Regional TUC. The West Midlands and the East Midlands Councils merged to form the Midlands TUC.

Source: TUC

Trade unions have continued their involvement in the Regional Industrial Development Board and Programme Management Committee disbursing national and European funds through the GO and RDA. The Regional Chambers involve trade unions as 'Economic and Social Partners' alongside business and the voluntary and community sectors (currently involving 5 trade unionists, including the Group's Vice Chair). This has recently extended to scrutiny of the RDA's activities (NEA 2002), albeit with limited trade union involvement (1 out of 33 panel members). Each of the sub-regional ILSCs has trade union involvement. The myriad of partnerships at the local level (e.g. SRB and 'New Deal' Steering Groups, Employment Tribunals Groups, ICT Steering Groups, Local Strategic Partnerships, New Deal for Communities partnerships) typically have at least some, often limited, trade union participation. Broadly, regional trade union and NTUC officers tend to be part of the corporatist elite in regional and sub-regional bodies while rank and file representatives and members participate in local level partnerships. The development of capacity to engage has cohered at the regional level but is attempting to reach the local level, albeit with some difficulty given the sheer number of local institutions.

The national TUC's regional organisation has evolved incrementally to address the radically changed context of local and regional development and governance. By 2003, there were seven full-time Regional TUC secretaries in England and Wales. Regional offices have been strengthened by the integration of the TUC Regional Secretariats with the TUC Regional Education

and Training Officers and TUC Learning Services. However, increased opportunities for participation have challenged the NTUC's capacity and the level and flexibility of its resources. TUC Regional secretariats are nationally funded, mainly to support salaries and office expenses. Additional income is generated through a relatively modest voluntary levy on unions affiliated to the Regional TUC Council. NTUC has achieved considerable success in securing external income (e.g. ESF, DfES, ILSC) but this is often ring-fenced for specific projects.

Grasping the opportunities?

In response to charges of token involvement in the new institutional arrangements, regional TUCs and affiliated trade unions now face the challenge of making effective use of the new opportunities for engagement. Notwithstanding issues of labour movement interest representation, trade union federations have a central role to play in local and regional development and governance in at least four related ways. First, by demonstrating credibility and consolidating their participation through the delivery of government policy objectives (e.g. learning and skills, workplace social partnership, productivity) with potential knock-on benefits for trade union recruitment and renewal (Manning 2002). Second, by broadening the issues addressed in mainstream debate (e.g. equalities, diversity) and underpinning the balanced economic, social and environmental approaches characteristic of the 'new centrism' in economic development policy (Geddes and Newman 1999). Third, by providing the focus for debate around more localised and welfarist alternatives to the "narrow optic of 'globalisation-competitiveness'"

(Lovering 2001): 352) that currently dominates the regional agenda (e.g. alternatives to public-private partnerships, contracting-out) (Foley 2002). Last, by providing a means for other formerly marginalised agents in local and regional civil society (e.g. the voluntary and community sector) to mobilise around a broadly progressive regional agenda. The NTUC has played a central role in co-ordinating such contributions in North East England.

Building capacity

Rapidly growing opportunities for participation have stretched the NTUC's organisational resources. Often involvement in the burgeoning administration of regional development and governance falls to a relatively limited number of individuals. While these participants have had to engage in learning by doing, they have quickly become overloaded and relatively detached from the broader labour movement through the accumulation of specialised knowledge and networks. Mechanisms to report back and account for the activities of participating trades unionists have been underdeveloped. Moreover, while trade unions strive to move closer to the ideal, the participating individuals have some way to go to match the diversity of the region they govern (Robinson and Shaw 2000). The need to broaden and deepen the pool of capable individuals able and willing to participate has become paramount. NTUC's strategy involved securing RDA funding for a dedicated Regional Policy Officer post and TUC Education's engagement in CURDS' Regional Governance capacity building course for economic and social partners funded by the North East Assembly.

In parallel, NTUC has developed a more policy-oriented approach focused upon clear priorities. Learning from the STUC about the need for rapid and transparent decision-making to facilitate engagement (McKay 1999), NTUC reformed its internal governance to encourage greater participation and enhance its ability to communicate both with its affiliated trade unions, legitimate policymaking bodies (Regional Executive and Council) and beyond to regional institutions. This involved a media engagement strategy and regional pages on the TUC national website, including information on events, learning services and union membership, newsletters and a regional and national labour movement contacts directory.

Other innovations sought to strengthen research capacity, building upon the independent traditions of Tyneside-based Trade Union Studies Information Unit (TUSIU), to make meaningful contributions to regional debates and improve the perception of NTUC as a credible partner amongst the main governance institutions. Developments involved joint projects with universities (Copeland and Philo 2000; O'Brien 2001), the establishment of the Economic Working Group (accountable to the Regional Council) to bring together trade unionists, academics and local/regional policymakers to support engagement and the development of an academic network mirroring those in Scotland and London. Capacity building has been central to underpinning the credibility and success of NTUC's engagement.

Shaping regional economic and social strategies

Bolstered by its enhanced capacity and increasingly consulted within the new governance arrangements, the NTUC made several interventions in economic and social strategies. First, the NTUC's response to the RDA's Regional Economic Strategy (RES) emphasised the need to develop a more rounded economy with a more appropriate balance between manufacturing and services, traditional and new industries, knowledge and labour intensive activities and indigenous and externally owned sources of growth. The response underlined the contribution that trade unions could make to delivery (e.g. cluster development), the need for capacity building support, the necessity of accountability as part of the English regions' devolution settlement and the delivery role of the public and voluntary sectors. Second, NTUC developed a regional manufacturing strategy and summit that underpinned the government's national strategy and regionally focused support networks through the RDAs (Pike and O'Brien 2000). Third, NTUC has worked alongside UNISON to emphasise the regional dimension to the national public services modernisation debate. Last, NTUC co-ordinated research on labour history and trade unionism for Newcastle-Gateshead's 'Capital of Culture' bid (O'Brien and Stirling 2001). From a relatively marginal position, NTUC is now developing a means of influencing regional economic and social strategies in the North East.

Delivering the learning and skills and equalities agendas

The traditional core trade union activity of workplace training now occupies a central position in national and regional economic policy (HMTreasury 2001).

NTUC are a key delivery partner for the RDA's RES objective to create a skilled, adaptable regional workforce and part of its Framework for Regional Employment and Skills Action. To respond to these demands, NTUC has established a regional Education, Learning and Skills Forum, integrating the work of TUC Education and TUC Learning Services, and bringing together trade unionists sitting on the RDA, LSCs and Lifelong Learning Partnerships, Regional Education Officers and TUC Education Course providers. In addition, NTUC is working with all four ILSCs in a 'Learning for All' lifelong learning project, using the partnership approach developed in the 1990s (Clough 1997). It has also been supplementing the relatively low uptake compared to London and the North West from the national Department for Education and Skills' national Union Learning Fund and delivering the regional Employer Training Pilots. Reinforcing their role as custodians of the equalities agenda, NTUC has secured European (ESF) funding to support research on barriers to employment and training experienced by women and ethnic minorities that has shaped social inclusion strategies in the region (TUC 2001; TUC 2002). Such examples reveal the ability of trade union federations to deliver fundamental elements of government policy and to broaden the terms of debate about the nature of regional economic and social development.

Participating in regional governance debates

The unfinished business of the English regions' political settlement culminated in the White Paper (CabinetOffice/DTLR 2002). National attention has focused on North East England due to its relatively high levels of support for regional government, shaped by its distinct regional identity and acute experience of

both economic and democratic deficits (Tomaney 2002). Following the internal decision to support elected regional assemblies, NTUC have developed the evidence base and led the debate within the regional and national trade union movement (O'Brien 2001; NorthernTUC 2002). Such activity underpinned national TUC's supportive response to the White Paper, emphasising its potential importance in boosting prosperity, strengthening national cohesion and including trade unions as key stakeholders (TUC 2002). Building upon its history of civic engagement in the region's Labourist politics, NTUC have been active campaigners in the North East Constitutional Convention, providing the Chair, and, notwithstanding debates about its substantive impact upon members, contributing to the Yes Campaign for the autumn 2004 referendum.

CONCLUSIONS AND KEY ISSUES

Drawing upon the experience of the NTUC in North East England, this contribution has analysed the participation of a trade union federation in local and regional development and governance. Devolution and regionalisation are generating growing demands for involvement and multi-level organisation by trade union federations across and between the local, sub-regional, regional, sub-national, national and international levels in the UK's devolving, multi-layered governance structure. Internal and external governance relationships are being remade vertically and horizontally. Multi-level organisation suggests a degree of decentralisation, division of labour and autonomy to support links to trade union renewal that is perhaps challenging for the labour movement's traditionally national centralism. While mirroring the concern with the

articulation of trade union activity at different levels in Europe (Waddington and Hoffman 2000), the UK and North East's particular experiences of local and regional engagement are moving toward but remain some way from the degree of power and influence afforded by the legislatively embedded role of trade unions in more devolved governance systems such as Germany.

The NTUC's experience in North East England suggests several strategic issues relevant to other nations and regions of the UK and beyond. First, trade union federations need to find and strengthen their voices at the local and regional level by considering how they represent, mobilise and articulate their collective interests (Kelly 1998). Enhancing the sophistication of public policy development requires a clear understanding of local and regional labour movement concerns and independent research capacity to provide evidence to support the identification of priorities, interventions and responses to consultations. By articulating well-supported arguments, regional trade union bodies can demonstrate credibility and capability as civic institutions and contribute to progressive economic, social and political development. Second, trade union federations can be a 'critical friend' with constructive and positive relations with key institutions as well as a channel for dissent and discussion of alternatives. Such a stance might counter accusations of co-option and capture. Third, an inclusive approach within and beyond the workplace can contribute to trade union renewal by fostering a consensus between the industrial and political arms of the labour movement and making common cause with the voluntary and community sector, and other relatively marginalised youth, women, black and minority ethnic, environmentalist and

faith groups. Developing such plural alliances may be a more complex and demanding way of working than the historically class-based struggles of tripartite corporatism.

As NTUC's experience in North East England demonstrates, the influence of trade union interests in local and regional development and governance has grown from a low base following devolution and regionalisation through an array of increasingly strategic interventions. However, their role and power to shape policy remains relatively under-developed and circumscribed by several critical issues, including: an underlying centralism in national government's local and regional development and governance agenda; national centralism and ambivalent attitudes within affiliated trade unions and the TUC; trade unions' role as one economic and social partner amongst many in plural, partnership-based governance arrangements; tensions between the involvement of accountable 'representatives' and individual appointments to public bodies; an insufficient level and flexibility of financial resources and research capacity and uncertainty concerning the degree to which engagement contributes to trade union renewal. Notwithstanding such perhaps surmountable barriers in the longer term, NTUC's experience in the North East demonstrates the potential contribution that trade union federations can make to local and regional development and governance. The challenge for the labour movement is to integrate such concerns into their core trade union renewal agenda.

Note

Peter O'Brien is the Regional Policy Officer at the Northern TUC and both Andy Pike and John Tomaney teach and research at CURDS. This paper builds upon Peter O'Brien's ESRC Studentship research (Award No: S00429937051). Thanks to the participants in the research project and the supervision committee Gill Hale (UNISON), Paul Nowak (NTUC) and Kevin Rowan (GMB) and the referees for their comments. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the OECD Local Employment and Economic Development (LEED) Programme, Société de Développement Angus (SDA) and the Community-University Research Alliance - Social Economy (CURA-SE) 'Rendez-Vous Montréal 2002' International Symposium on 'Industrial Reconversion Initiatives Implemented by Actors in Civil Society' (May). The usual disclaimers, as always, apply.

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